

How to Work with Clients Who Blame

Module 4: Practical Strategies to Help Clients Break Blaming Patterns

Part 3: Four Practical Skills to Spark Change in Others

with Bill O'Hanlon, LMFT; Joan Borysenko, PhD;
and Ruth Buczynski, PhD

National Institute for the Clinical
Application of Behavioral Medicine





How to Work with Clients Who Blame: Practical Strategies to Help Clients Break Blaming Patterns

Four Practical Skills to Spark Change in Others

Dr. Buczynski: In module 2, Marsha Linehan and Ron Siegel touched on the specific situation where the “other” person may actually be to blame for the client’s problem.

And this can be a really difficult issue, especially if the object of blame has no real intention of changing.

So how do we approach this? One way, as we heard earlier, could be to help the client change something about *their* reaction to the other person’s behavior.

So let’s unpack this a little more. How can we help clients make some minor tweaks that could help them to struggle less with blame?

“We’re all connected and we’re all in patterns. If you change your part of the pattern, you can change their part of the pattern.”

Mr. O’Hanlon: I think there are ways also to have one person change, and change the other person.

What I tell them is, “We’re all connected and we’re all in patterns. If you change your part of the pattern, you can change their part of the pattern.” It doesn’t always work on the first try. I tell them, “Think about other people who interact with that person and get a different response than you do. Just model on some other people.”

Dr. Buczynski: Helping the client model how other people work with the person they’re blaming could be an effective way to promote change. And it’s also the first thing Bill suggests when he runs into this issue.

Mr. O’Hanlon: “Maybe you *can* change that person. Maybe you *can* change your boss. Maybe there’s somebody else at work that deals with him in a little different way, or thinks of him in a little different way.”

Sometimes I’ll say, “Go interview that person, because you’re seeing your boss as this critical person who hates you. He seems to interact with other people the same way, but it doesn’t *get* to them in the same way. Go ask them why not.”

They go, “I just think he’s, you know, in a bad marriage and I just give him a break; I let it roll off my back. I don’t take it personally.”

“Hmm. I was taking it personally, like he was attacking *me*. That’s an interesting way to talk about it.”

I try to find from other people how they think about it, what are their theories about it, what are their action patterns, and see if I can model on any of that stuff.

Dr. Buczynski: It can be so easy for the client to take things personally in these cases, especially if they see themselves as being singled out.

And that’s why Bill’s interview and modeling process can be so valuable. It can bring in an additional perspective that the client might not have even considered.

If a client can take in other people's experience with this person, including how they think and act toward them, it could help the client shift out of a stagnant blame pattern.

Mr. O'Hanlon: There's this silly story I use sometimes with this. It's of a couple who couldn't break up because they couldn't figure out the custody of the dog. They were bitter - embittered with one another. We had both of them at our center where we did kind of "behind the mirror" sometimes supervision.

We had the couple go home and use the dog as their role model: "How does the dog get a better response from this person than *you* do?"

"The dog persists. The dog doesn't take it personally."

They just both studied the dog, because they loved the dog a lot.

You can do that with other people too: "How does their best friend get a response from them? How does your daughter get a response from her or him that you don't get?" You won't be the same as *that* person, but you can sometimes use little bits of their behavior - their ways of interacting - to be a role model for you.

Dr. Buczynski: Ok, so let's just walk this back a little bit now and focus on the action-reaction part of the process, the interpersonal relationship itself.

Sometimes when there's reciprocal anger and blame between two people, it could be helpful for the client to ask themselves one vital question.

Mr. O'Hanlon: The next thing is I think, "How do I always behave with this person in *response* to this person and how can I change my part of the pattern? Do something slightly different or radically different."

Sometimes people are like, "But he's wrong/she's wrong!" and I go, "Well, would you rather be right or would you rather get results? I'm here to coach you and get results. I know, and maybe that person is all that, but sometimes being right is the booby prize. What you want is to have a better time at work. Give up being right and just start to experiment."

"How can I change my part of the pattern? Do something slightly different or radically different."

Ralph Waldo Emerson said years ago, "All life is an experiment. The more experiments you do, the better." I think sometimes people have stopped experimenting to find out if something else works with this person they're having problems with.

Dr. Buczynski: This sounds so simple but it could be the very thing that helps bring about change. Help the client to change their part of the pattern and it could lead to positive results.

Now, there's no question this can be a tough sell. We want to be right, especially when we *know* we're right.

But as Bill said, sometimes being right is the best way to lose the game.

Alright, let's go at this from another angle now. Let's say the person being blamed just will not change their behavior. One approach that could be helpful would be to take action and change the *context* in which that behavior occurs.

Mr. O'Hanlon: I think of a story a guy I knew told me. He said when he was a kid of four years old/three years old, I think/maybe two - I don't know, he was a toddler in some way - and his father had a new job. It was

delivering milk and his father brought a truck home that he was going to use to leave at five in the morning on Monday when his new job started. He had to go and get the milk at the dairy and deliver it to people back in the days when they used to do this.

The kid got a ride in it a couple of times during the weekend. Then Monday morning, the kid comes out in his little diapers and he says, “Go truck!” His dad says, “No, I gave you a ride this weekend. I can’t now. I have to go to work.” The kid says, “Go truck!” and he starts to throw a tantrum.

Then, as his mother’s watching from the kitchen and his father’s watching from the seat of his truck, the kid just runs head-first into the brick wall they have on their patio. Blood starts spurting out. The father jumps up and they get a towel and put it on. The father has to go to work so the mother takes the kid to the doc and gets him sewed up.

Dr. Buczynski: Ok, I think we can see the problematic behavior here and what needs to change.

Now, if this was just a one-time occurrence it would be bad enough.

But the same thing happened again between the father and son, just a few days later. The father gets into his truck, and his son decides that he wants to go for a ride.

This time, however, the father changed one key part of his reaction. And that made the difference.

Mr. O’Hanlon: The kid comes out and throws a tantrum. He wants to go on the truck and the father says, “I can’t take you, I’ve got to go to work.” The kid starts to rev up and the father just drives away and says, “It’s your head.” That was that.

He said, “They told me that story as I was growing up. I was so glad he said ‘It’s your head’ because the brick wall is there, you know – you’re going to hit it.”

When I’m dealing with people and they’re with somebody who’s drinking or doing drugs, you can’t directly tell them, “Stop that” because it won’t work. I mean, you’ve tried already to do what you need to do. But you can sometimes help them take the consequences of their own behavior and get out of the way; you don’t buffer them from the consequences so they run into their own brick wall.

Dr. Buczynski: As Bill said, issues of substance abuse could be one scenario where this technique might be helpful. Dr. Joan Borysenko found this to be true when she was developing a mindfulness program at a local treatment center.

Dr. Borysenko: Generally speaking, they have to “hit the brick wall” that Bill was talking about in his way, very charming way. They have to hit a brick wall before they can finally say, “If I keep this up, I’m going to kill myself or somebody else. This is *not* going to work for me.”

*“They have to hit a brick wall before they can finally say, **If I keep this up, I’m going to kill myself or somebody else. This is not going to work for me.**”*

One kid finally faced up to his addiction – God, *multiple* addictions – to booze, to pills, to cocaine, to all kinds of things, when he called home to ask for more money he said, “I’m in Seattle. I’m stranded here. Send money,” and finally his parents said, “No. You’ll have to find your way back yourself.”

He said, “That was the turning point for me. I couldn’t anymore get what I wanted, so I had to face up to circumstances.”

If you're hanging around addicts long enough, you hear lots of stories about the brick walls they hit, and how that induced change.

Mr. O'Hanlon: The way I think about it is you can't change people directly all the time, but you can change the *context* in which the behavior occurs. And sometimes *they* get motivated to change.

"You can't change people directly all the time, but you can change the *context* in which the behavior occurs."

Dr. Buczynski: Consequences can be a great motivator. And this technique can also help give the client a small sense of control in situations where they maybe feel out of control.

So now let's take a look at one more way you can disrupt a blame pattern and bring about change in the process.

When Bill was in college, he lived with his best friend. It was the typical situation – no money, grueling classes, no sleep. I'm sure you can relate.

But there was one bright side. His friend got a car as a graduation present from his parents. This gave Bill and his friend a little bit of freedom during the school year.

But the car was used. And it had the typical used car problems. Problems that are only magnified when the owner is a poor college student.

Mr. O'Hanlon: He would let me use the car, and at a certain point the car broke down. We sat down to figure out what happened: I assumed *he* was going to check the oil and fill up the oil, and he assumed I was going to check the oil because he was letting me use his car.

We realized that didn't work, so we decided to start a different model. The different model was each of us would pretend we owned the car totally on our own, and we'd do everything that we'd do if nobody else was taking care of the car. We decided that "100 percent responsibility" model was a much better one. The car didn't break down after that. Each one of us pretended we owned it alone.

Dr. Buczynski: This idea of taking full ownership of a problem can really move the needle. It can take away many of the issues that lead to blame and replace them with actionable strategies for avoiding future blame.

Mr. O'Hanlon: I sometimes tell that story to people and I say, "Even if it's that other person, what about if you just assume it's 100 percent your responsibility to change this thing, to maintain it, and to do something that shifts it? Even if that's not fair, you'll get a car that runs, or you'll get a marriage that runs, or you'll get a job that works, or you'll get a life that works in some way." I like to give that analogy with people and convince them that, even if it's not fair, it might work to pretend that you are 100 percent responsible for the change you want to have happen.

Dr. Buczynski: Before we move on, let's just review **the four strategies Bill will use to help clients reduce blame and foster change in others.**

1. Have the client try to model the way others interact with the person whom they're blaming.
2. Have the client experiment with one change in the way they typically react to the other person. This can be a slight or a radical change.
3. Help the client try to change the context in which the other person's behavior occurs.

4. Suggest the client pretends that they're 100% responsible for the problem.

Ok, we've looked at several different ways to reverse the patterns of blame. These are strategies that can help clients be more effective in their interactions and achieve better results in their relationships.

We're going to continue on with this track now in the next module. Please join us in module 5 as we get into ways to resolve the blame that poisons relationships.

I'll see you there.